

History and politics continue to create challenges, but the Vietnam Education Foundation looks to steer a course toward a better future for Vietnam and improved relations between two former adversaries.

BY MARK A. ASHWILL

ON THIS, THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY of the end of what the Vietnamese know as the American War, as we are bombarded with books, articles and TV specials about the war, I have good news to share with you about Vietnam, the country.

Vietnam, at which the U.S. military threw every weapon in its arsenal short of nuclear weapons, is a country in which 3 million people died in a war that was ultimately about national liberation and not communist expansion. While it entered a new era of peace and unification as a poor, war-ravaged nation with leaders who admitted that "waging a war is simple, but running a country is very difficult," Vietnam is now widely viewed by the international development community as one of the developing world's great success stories.

Vietnam and the United States are full-fledged partners in a variety of arenas. Two-way trade in 2004 exceeded \$6 billion with more than \$5 billion in imports to the United States and more than \$1 billion in U.S. exports to Vietnam. Last year, Vietnam welcomed in excess of 2.5 million tourists, 272,473 of whom were Americans, a 25 percent increase from 2003, and second only to China. President Bush selected Vietnam as the 15th priority country for his AIDS Relief initiative with an investment of \$25 million. There are more than 3,000 young Vietnamese studying in the United States and the U.S. government spends more on educational exchange programs in Vietnam than any other country. The two governments are even cooperating in counterterrorism and law enforcement.

One of the most promising yet little known embodiments of this spirit of cooperation is the establishment of the Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF), a creative and innovative scholarship-for-debt program that will train a generation of Vietnam's most academically gifted young people and likely transform Vietnam's scientific and tech-

nological landscape, thus contributing mightily to its development for the remainder of the twenty-first century.

VEF is a model long-term educational exchange program between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam that provides fellowships for Vietnamese nationals to study at U.S. institutions of higher education at graduate levels in the fields of physical sciences, natural sciences, environmental sciences, mathematics, medicine, and technology, including information technology; and enables U.S. professors to teach in these fields at Vietnamese institutions. In some ways, VEF is a vestige of what the Vietnamese know as the American War, raising the specter of the United States' one-time ally, the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)—a country that otherwise lives on only in the hearts and minds of its former citizens, many of whom are now part of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Setting the Stage

In April 1997, during a three-day visit to Vietnam, then Secretary of the Treasury Robert Rubin announced that the Vietnamese government had agreed to repay the \$146 million wartime debt of the former South Vietnam. Four years earlier, Vietnam agreed in principle to assume the debt from its former enemy as part of a larger agreement that cleared the way for renewed international borrowing by Hanoi, previously blocked by Washington.

As Nguyen Manh Hoa, director of the external financial division of the Finance Ministry, noted at the time, "We had to agree on old debts so we could have new relations, such as new loans and cooperation agreements." In other words, the U.S. government pressured Vietnam, which had no choice but to swallow its pride and set aside principle for the greater good of continued improvement in the two countries' economic relationship, culminating

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in a bilateral trade agreement four years later.

According to the U.S. Treasury Department, about \$76 million of the wartime debt is principle from agricultural and development loans. The remaining \$70 million is negotiated interest payments. Within 30 days of Rubin's announcement, Vietnam was scheduled to make a down payment of more than \$8.5 million, and then began regular payments aimed at paying off the entire \$146 million by the year 2019.

Most of the overdue loans date to the late 1960s, when the United States was funneling hundreds of millions of dollars to prop up South Vietnam in pursuit of a failed strategy of Vietnamization leading to "peace with honor" (i.e., U.S. withdrawal) in 1973, and those frenzied and desperate final days at the end of April 1975 as communist forces closed in on Saigon and national independence and peace in a unified Vietnam metamorphosed from distant dream to concrete reality ahead of schedule.

The Vietnam Education Foundation Act of 2000

Fast forward to November 2000 and President Bill Clinton's historic visit to Vietnam. One of the shining moments of Clinton's visit to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, was the announcement about the Vietnam Education Foundation. VEF is the legislative brainchild of U.S. Senate Vietnam veterans John McCain, John Kerry, Bob Kerrey, Charles Robb, Max Cleland and Chuck Hagel, who had the foresight, wisdom, and decency to propose that these funds be used for a program that will benefit Vietnam and not the U.S. Treasury exclusively.

In a press release on December 15, 2000, Kerry's office described some successful precedents for the kind of exchange programs this legislation represents. In 1908, the United States returned a portion of the Boxer indemnity bond to China for the purpose of educating Chinese students in U.S. institutions. Since 1975, the Japanese-American Friendship Commission has been funding educational and cultural exchanges through the debt repaid by Japan to the United States for the return of Okinawa.

According to the VEF Web site, the foundation is "an organization created by the U.S. Congress and funded annually by the U.S. Federal Government." While this is true on the surface, the whole truth is more complex and convoluted. Think of it this way: the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is repaying old debts incurred by the government it defeated in a war of national liberation (South Vietnam) to that now defunct government's former master and patron, the United States. In effect, the people of Vietnam are funding an elite scholarship program that is being administered by an independent agency of the U.S. government's executive branch with its headquarters in Washington, D.C. and a representative office in Hanoi.

The original legislation (S.3241) outlines the mission of the VEF in this straightforward way: "To carry out an international fellowship program between the United States and Vietnam to enable Vietnamese nationals to pursue advanced studies in science, mathematics,

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medicine, and technology; to enable United States citizens to teach in those fields in Vietnam; and to promote reconciliation between the two countries." Indeed, the VEF Web site states that its mission is "to promote closer bilateral relations between the U.S. and Vietnam through scholarships and educational exchange programs" and describes itself as "a special initiative by the Government and the people of the United States to promote closer relations between the U.S. and Vietnam."

In contrast, however, the "VEF Summary of Activities, Oct. 1, 2002-Sept. 20, 2004" states that "VEF is functioning as a productive and useful foreign policy tool to promote the U.S. national interests in Vietnam." This is either an example of mission creep or empty political rhetoric designed to resonate with and placate a domestic constituency.

According to the legislation that breathed life into VEF, the foundation has an annual allocation of \$5 million through fiscal year 2018. After September 30, 2016, VEF may not award any new fellowship, or extend any existing fellowship. The foundation will be abolished 120 days after the expiration of the last fellowship. (The \$5 million annual budget, 80 percent of which supports fellowships in the United States, does raise the question of how the balance of Vietnam's annual debt repayment is being spent.)

VEF's Uniqueness

Unlike the Ford Foundation's International Fellowship Program (IFP), which recruits from among underrepresented populations in Vietnam and many other countries and is concerned about factors such as access, equity, and diversity, or the Fulbright Program, which offers advanced study opportunities to international students in a wide array of fields and highlights mutual understanding between the United States and sending/receiving countries as its *raison d'être*, VEF fellowships are limited to scientific, technical, and medical fields and awarded solely on the basis of academic merit.

VEF itself is a paragon of technocratic efficiency, perhaps reflecting the management style of its executive director, Kien Pham, who was born in Vietnam and emigrated to the United States in 1977. With a master's degree in business administration and master of arts degree from Stanford University and a distinguished record of

leadership and experience in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors, plus a unique cultural and political understanding of both the United States and Vietnam, Pham is well-suited for this daunting political and administrative undertaking.

He is assisted by a small staff near Washington, D.C., and a staff of nine in Hanoi, who include a program manager, a program assistant, a data analysis manager, IT system manager, and IT expert. They and their colleagues spend their days responding to e-mail and telephone inquiries from prospective applicants, processing applications, organizing predeparture orientations, making travel arrangements for outgoing fellows, and maintaining the IT components of VEF's operation, including the Web site (www.vef.gov). The Hanoi office provides fellows with practical information about living conditions in the United States, its customs, its people, visas, the academic system, clothing, currency, insurance, availability of commodities, language problems, travel and reception arrangements, customs requirements, living accommodations, medical facilities, registration requirements, social activities, and schools and universities.

During a recent visit to Hanoi, I stopped by the VEF representative office on the fifth floor of the Hanoi Towers, on the site of the Hoa Lo Prison, dubbed the "Hanoi Hilton" by the U.S. prisoners of war who were held there.¹ I was greeted by Hang Thi Hoang, special assistant to the executive director, and the acting country director, Chad Bolwick, who noted as an aside that he was happy to talk me, since the office does not see many visitors. Staff, reflective of VEF's recruitment strategy, discourage prospective applicants from "dropping in," referring all comers to the VEF Web site. For follow-up questions, e-mail contact is the preferred means of communication over the telephone. While VEF's form of outreach is impersonal and, in that respect, both un-American and un-Vietnamese, it is efficient and streamlined. This is in contrast to the Hanoi office of the Institute of International Education (IIE), a nongovernmental organization based in New York. IIE's Hanoi office, for example, is a bustling place with an open door policy and features a resource area that young Vietnamese who are interested in studying in the United States can utilize at their leisure.

Spreading the Word

While not quite a household word in Vietnam, VEF has done a yeoman's job of letting people know about its existence and its mission. It advertises widely through Vietnam in the print media and online, including pop-up ads on selected Web sites. In addition to these means, there is word of mouth, which is probably the best and most effective form of publicity in a country like Vietnam. Within a breathtakingly short period of time VEF has gone from being an unknown quantity, the new kid on the block, to a high profile, indeed the premier, grantmaking organization for bright and talented Vietnamese in scientific and technical fields.

In the most recent round this past January, VEF had almost 1,700 people register for 2006 fellowships. Four hundred progressed to the next qualifying round—a math test. U.S. National Academies will take the top 50 percent of the test scores and examine the full dossiers to select the top 120. Those who make this cut will be given a 45-minute individual oral exam in Vietnam by U.S. scientists and academicians in the summer.

Since the purpose of the program is to produce young scientists and university faculties, the preference is for doctoral degree candidates and recent university graduates, including junior faculty. Unlike other scholarship programs, no work experience is required, nor is government affiliation needed. VEF fellowships are open to all qualified citizens of Vietnam, regardless of their gender, regional origin, social or political background. Since the operative word here is "qualified," the net effect is that the majority are male and urban residents, quite a few with previous overseas study experience.²

Related Initiatives and Activities

One of the special features of the VEF Fellowship Program is the VEF community. Fellows have created and maintain the online VEF Village (www.vefvillage.org) whose purpose is to build a communication network among the fellows, who can share similar experiences, discuss issues and ideas openly, and support each other professionally and personally. The VEF Village is intended to be one of a number of ways for these U.S. trained

U.S. University Placements for 2004 VEF Fellows

Eighty-seven new fellows for 2004 are attending the following U.S. institutions of higher education:

Auburn University
Brown University
Carnegie Mellon University
Columbia University
Cornell University
Georgia Institute of Technology
Iowa State University
Johns Hopkins University
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
New York University

Ohio State University
Princeton University
Rutgers University
Stanford University
Tufts University
University of California at Berkeley
University of California at Los Angeles
University of California at Santa Barbara
University of Georgia

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
University of Michigan at Ann Arbor
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
University of Southern California
University of Texas at Austin
University of Texas at Houston
University of Utah
University of Virginia
Yale University

Fields of study include the following:

Agriculture
Biotechnology
Chemistry
Engineering
Environmental Science
Health and Medical Sciences
Information Technology/
Computer Science
Mathematics
Natural Sciences
Physics
Public Health

Source: Vietnam Education Foundation

scientists and technology experts to develop friendships in the United States that will endure after they return to Vietnam.

In December 2004, the VEF hosted an annual conference in Washington, D.C., entitled "Developing Science and Technology: The Best Of, By and For Vietnam." In addition to VEF fellows, participants included scientists and experts in technology, professional associations dedicated to the advancement of science and technology, government agencies supporting Vietnam and the development of science and technology, and corporations interested in developments in science and technology in Vietnam. Topics included: cross-cultural issues, becoming established and achieving academic success, effective communication and presentation skills for scientists, publishing a scientific paper, scientific ethics, professional organizations, an overview of needs assessment in Vietnam, building an advanced research and educational system in Vietnam, funding research in the international community, and developing an action plan for Vietnam.

Another project that is vital to helping VEF fellows realize their potential once they return to Vietnam and key for Vietnam's scientific and technological development is the Centers of Excellence initiative. Specifically, the purpose of the centers is to create career opportunities for the fellows upon their return home. This initiative began in January 2004 during a visit by Dr. Phillip Griffiths, head of the Science Initiative Group (SIG), Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J. SIG provides support and guidance for the Millennium Science Initiative (MSI), which is designed to build internal capacity in science and technology in developing countries.³ VEF organized a seminar in April 2004 entitled "Building Science and Technology Capacity in Vietnam," bringing together scientists, policymakers, and experts from the United States, Vietnam, South Korea, Chile, and Malaysia to discuss MSI.

Last November, VEF signed a statement of cooperation with the Vietnamese Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) and the U.S.-based SIG to formulate a plan for centers of excellence in science and technology in Vietnam. According to the plan, VEF and SIG would provide technical and strategic support to MOST as it investigates and builds an appropriate model to create such centers. MOST will coordinate a Vietnamese interagency group on this program. Once approved by the prime minister of Vietnam, a program proposal will be submitted to the World Bank for financing. The World Bank has financed similar programs under its MSI in other countries, such as Chile, Brazil, and Mexico. SIG Chairman Griffiths characterized MSI as an opportunity for Vietnam to create "a research and education structure that is competitive and transparent, with linkages to the international scientific community."

The VEF Experience

For the 2004/05 academic year a total of 102 fellows are attending 37 U.S. universities and studying in 45 subject fields. Of those fellows, 87 are new for the year. Most are pursuing

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a doctoral degree while some are pursuing a master's degree. Females comprise 22 percent and males 78 percent of all fellows. The majority were university instructors in Vietnam and the major fields of study are divided between engineering (42 percent) and natural sciences (58 percent). Within those broad groupings, computer and information sciences lead (19 percent), followed by health and medical sciences (17 percent), electrical and computer engineering (11 percent), biological sciences (5 percent), chemistry (5 percent), mathematical sciences (5 percent), and physics (5 percent). Some of the institutions include Arizona State University, Brown University, Cornell University, Iowa State University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Ohio University, Stanford, State University of New York (SUNY)/Buffalo, SUNY/New Paltz, and the University of Chicago.

Among the VEF fellows I spoke with were: Nguyen Tri Dung, a 25 year-old male from Ha Tinh in central Vietnam, who is working on his doctorate in operations research at MIT; Chanh Q. Kieu, a 25 year-old male from Hanoi, who is pursuing a doctorate in meteorology at the University of Maryland College Park; Hung V. Nguyen, a 28 year-old male doctoral degree candidate in computer science at Arizona State University, who hails from Hanoi; Hanh Bui, a 24 year-old female from Ho Chi Minh City, who is studying dentistry at the University of Pennsylvania; Long D. Nguyen, a 29 year-old male studying civil engineering at the University of California at Berkeley, who is from Hue in central Vietnam; and Ha Nguyen, a 26 year-old male studying electrical and computer engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who is from Phu Tho province in the North.

As with other VEF fellows, several had the benefit of prior overseas study. For example, Nguyen earned master of science and master of arts degrees in computer science at Cambridge University in England with the assistance of a Chevening Cambridge Overseas Trust Tate and Lyle scholarship and Ha Nguyen received his undergraduate degree from Ecole Polytechnique in France. Some were already studying in the United States before receiving a VEF grant.

Aside from the obvious reasons, they decided to apply for a VEF fellowship because of the lure and rewards of being part of a scientific community with people of different backgrounds—seen as an advantage when they return to Vietnam. They were also attracted by the idea and prospect of having facilities to do research after they complete their studies in the United States. Also mentioned was the

chance to contribute something to their country. One even mentioned the leadership skills he could obtain by being involved with VEF. "I know running the foundation is a very challenging task where they have to face many constraints (from the U.S. government, Vietnamese government and also from the fellows because they have limited funding)." Another fellow referred to VEF as "currently one of the best opportunities for Vietnamese students who have the ambition to obtain U.S. higher education."

One VEF fellow was previously enrolled in a doctoral program in the United States, which indicates that financial support likely was not his highest priority in deciding to apply for a VEF grant. He viewed it as a "great chance to get involved in exciting academic interaction and also the social activities among themselves. My goal is to get to know more about the other Vietnamese students in the United States as well as try to build a connection among us for our future careers in Vietnam, and furthermore, to contribute to the future collaboration and friendship between Vietnam and the United States." This student helped to develop the VEF Village and is developing a so-called VEF Repository, an electronic environment for VEF fellows to exchange ideas and works, as well as to prepare for the job market in the future.

Bui had already dreamed of studying dental medicine but had to postpone her dream because her family had exhausted their funds supporting her undergraduate studies. VEF presented her with the rare opportunity to enroll in a U.S.-based DDS program as a foreign national. She applied to the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine, her first choice, in 2003 and was accepted. While searching for financial aid opportunities, which are few and far between for internationals in the fields of medicine and dental medicine, her parents came across information about VEF in a Vietnamese newspaper. They e-mailed her the phone number and Web site address; she called the office and spoke with Kien Pham, the executive director, and began the application process.

Life After Graduation

I asked my focus group of VEF fellows to reflect on what they would be returning to in Vietnam as it relates to employment, what they learned in the United States and the state of their field. Some will return to research institutes and teaching positions at universities, while others plan to work in industry, for the government, or a combination thereof. Some acknowledge that while their fields may not be new in Vietnam they are not yet well-developed. They see this as an opportunity to apply what they have learned and to contribute to the development of science and technology in Vietnam.

Some admitted to having no idea what they were going to do or what position they could have in Vietnam with their newly minted U.S. degree. "At this time, all I have to do is to work hard rather than thinking about finding a position in the future. Hopefully, the situation will be better in the near future," mentioned one. I just know that I will return, but I don't have yet a clear plan what to

do. Nevertheless, I prefer to be involved in an academic, educational environment once I return, because I feel that's where I can make the best contribution for Vietnam," explained another. Even those who are unsure of what the future might bring agree that the knowledge and experience they acquired in the United States will be helpful and that they will have their chance to make significant contributions. Since VEF fellows are in the United States on J visas (for visiting scholars), this increases the likelihood that they will return to Vietnam after graduation and perhaps a period of work.

Nguyen, the computer science student at Arizona State, has been invited by the rector of the College of Technology (Coltech) at Vietnam National University to be a professor after he graduates. In the meantime, he will return to Vietnam in the summer to teach and conduct research with colleagues at Coltech, and was recently asked to serve as co-chair of the Program Committee of Young Vietnamese Scientists Meeting in Nha Trang this summer.

Bui, the aspiring maxillofacial surgeon, who left Vietnam after graduating from high school, plans "to make radical changes in Vietnam's oral health care via health education, prevention and appropriate treatment." She says, "My main objective would be to implement preventative care for school children to reduce the high rate of tooth decay in Vietnam. I would also like to work on an affordable dental care insurance plan for the public and, if resources permit, free-of-charge surgery for children with oral and maxillofacial deformities for low-income families."

Plowshares From Swords

The Vietnam Education Foundation is an investment of a relatively miniscule amount of money that will reap untold and myriad rewards for the remainder of the twenty-first century and beyond in Vietnam. It, without a doubt, promises to be one of the great success stories in the still budding relationship between two former enemies. As a legacy of the U.S. war in Vietnam, VEF is, symbolically speaking, a well-conceived and superbly executed effort to turn swords into plowshares.

The visionary plan to create centers of excellence and become involved in the MSI will ensure the realization of the program's twin goals of bringing the United States and Vietnam closer together and helping Vietnam to create the conditions for success in science and technology. The dream of establishing a science, engineering and medical community of people and institutions that can implement a strong teaching and research agenda, create economic growth, maintain scientific cooperation with the United States, and enable Vietnam to gain from and contribute to scientific and technological advances globally is within reach.

While the focus is on the physical sciences, natural sciences, environmental sciences, medicine, mathematics, engineering, and information technology, the foundation is taking a look at other disciplines that are part of the Vietnamese government's science and technology agenda, including biotechnology, especially in agricul-

tural science, and public health. To its credit, VEF notes that this list of priority fields might change or be expanded to respond to the emerging needs of Vietnam. The foundation is also creating an alliance of schools currently hosting VEF fellows. The goal is to create a sense of community between these universities and colleges and encourage cost-sharing; host institutions help to leverage VEF funding by awarding assistantships to qualified fellows whenever possible.

Last June, the legendary General Vo Nguyen Giap (mastermind of the pivotal Vietnamese victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu and a key strategist in the campaign against U.S. forces) sent a letter of congratulations to VEF fellows, their families, and other guests at the farewell dinner reception in Hanoi. He quoted President Ho Chi Minh, who stated that "whether Vietnam can be on par with other powerful countries in the world or not depends significantly on the youth's ability to study well" noting that Ho had written a letter to the U.S. government immediately after Vietnam declared independence from France in 1945 in which he proposed sending 50 Vietnamese students to the United States to be trained in the field of science. "And today, his desire has come true," Giap wrote.

How different history might be if President Truman had responded to that and other letters from Ho Chi Minh. I wonder what President Ho would think of this Byzantine arrangement in

which Vietnam is indirectly funding scholarships through a U.S. agency for some of its most brilliant young men and women to earn master's and doctoral degrees from leading institutions in the United States. He would probably smile to himself, knowing the revolutionary impact that the Vietnam Education Foundation will have on the future development of Vietnam, secure in the knowledge that the "U.S. national interests" that the foundation claims to be promoting will surely complement those of Vietnam. **IE**

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Endnotes

1. Built by the French colonialists in 1896, this facility was previously used as a prison and site of execution for Vietnamese resistance fighters.
2. Vietnam is still very much a patriarchal society. There is also a direct correlation between one's place of residence and family income. The per capita income is significantly higher in Vietnam's cities than in rural areas.
3. For more information about the initiative, visit www.msi-sig.org.

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